

Interview with the UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery



The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery and former US President, Bill Clinton

In your role as the United Nations Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, what are your top priorities in assisting the tsunami-struck countries to accelerate their recovery?

First of all, my intention is to keep the world's attention on this opera-

tion, both in order to avoid the short attention span that has characterized so many previous international efforts of this kind, as well as to ensure that promises made do not become promises forgotten. Second, I am focusing on coordination to ensure that all the relevant players keep the spirit of teamwork that has characterized the operations so far. Third, I am promoting transparency and accountability measures to ensure that resources are used well and in a way that reflects the beneficiaries' own priorities. Last, but not least, I am working to promote a new kind of recovery, one that not only restores what existed previously, but goes beyond: building better and safer communities.

The coastal areas in these countries are recurrently exposed to hydrometeorological hazards, such as tropical cyclones, storm surge and flooding. In your measures and priorities related to recovery and rebuilding of these communities, are you undertaking any activities to reduce the future impacts of all hazards posing risk to these coastal areas? What measures must be undertaken by the countries in these regions to ensure sustainable development?

One core element of my approach to "building back better" is the need to reduce the vulnerabilities of the affected communities to future disasters, whether they are tsunami-related or related to other natural hazards, such as floods and hurricanes. I believe one of my key responsibilities is to ensure that governments include disaster-reduction measures effectively in the recovery process. I will be working hard to promote this in 2006.

Many people settle in coastal areas because the sea provides an important source of income. To ensure sound development of the coastal communities, risk reduction needs to become a national and local priority. Careful coastal planning is required. In practice, this means that tsunami recovery planning—as well as every day development decisions—should be taken with long-term considerations in mind. For example, new infrastructure should be located in safer areas; schools and hospitals need to be more disaster-resilient; early warning systems need to be in place; and people need to be aware of the risks and hazards in their communities so they are better prepared to cope with them.

As the UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, are you also addressing the broader global needs for advancing the disaster risk reduction agenda as a whole? What are the most challenging areas that must be addressed at national, regional and international levels?

The past year has sadly demonstrated that disasters can strike anywhere, at anytime. We all need to be better prepared. The World Conference for Disaster Reduction, which took place in Japan only a few weeks after the tsunami struck, could not have been more timely. The outcome of this conference—the Hyogo Framework for Action—sets out strategic goals, priorities for action, and agreed steps for implementation for governments and other stakeholders to reduce the impact of future disasters. I continue to urge all governments and other stakeholders to implement the Hyogo Framework and include disaster-reduction policies in their development planning and recovery efforts.



It is particularly important that national, regional and international efforts do not ignore the important role of conservation in disaster-risk reduction. In the area affected by the 2004 tsunami, that includes substantial replanting and new planting of mangroves. For the area affected by hurricane *Katrina* in 2005, it requires the recovery of wetlands as well as rebuilding of the levees.

Traditionally, disaster risk management has been focused on post-disaster emergency response and recovery. It has been advocated that a portion of this resource for development and humanitarian actions be allotted to proactive international, national and regional preventive strategies built on early warnings, risk assessment and risk transfer mechanisms. What are the challenges and how can we overcome them?

Securing funds for prevention has always been a challenge, in part because successful prevention is measured in terms of what did not happen rather than by what did. We need to sensitize governments to the importance of investing in disaster prevention. The private sector must become more involved. And we need to make sure that development does not actually increase vulnerabilities. I want 2006 to be a breakthrough year on this agenda. I will be doing my part to make sure it is.

Over the past several decades, global scientific and technical coordination and cooperation have led to better understanding of hazards, their impacts and availability of operational warning capabilities. How critical is the role

of the scientific and technical community in accelerating developments for strengthening capacities for disaster risk reduction? Can scientific and technical information and expertise facilitate decision making in this area?

The role of the scientific and technical community has been fundamental in the development of better understanding of hazards and their impacts. Decisions taken in the field of disaster reduction need to be based on the best scientific and technical information. The challenge, however, often lies in "translating" this knowledge into information that decision-makers can easily use. There is often a communication gap between the scientific and policy-making communities, which do not always speak the same language. Scientists need support, to help them become better communicators and policy-makers need to be trained to better understand how science can help in decision-making.

In your speech to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on 14 July 2005, you stressed the need to complete multi-hazard early warning systems that are built on a sound and sustainable technical foundation. Many challenges remain from developing the technical aspects of early warning to ensuring that early warnings reach the public and actions can be taken. How would you assess progress?

I have been following very closely the development of the regional early warning system over the past year and I receive regular updates from the various organizations that are involved in the process. Important progress has been recorded so far, especially in establishing the regional coordination mechanisms. While we are fortunate in having an interim early warning system in place, I am eager to see establishment of the permanent, fully-fledged system.





UN Headquarters, New York, April 2005 — Bill Clinton With the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan

Technology offers only part of the answer, however. A bigger challenge may lie in ensuring that all the people at the community level have access to timely warnings, and that they know how to react to them. Much work still needs to be done at the local level to ensure that coordination and communication mechanisms work between all the relevant institutions and actors. Community awareness and education on disaster prevention are key elements in this process.

National agencies such as the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services contribute significantly to disaster risk reduction and economic development, through the issue of warnings for hydrometeorological hazards (tropical cyclones, tornadoes, severe weather, floods, droughts, etc.) and collection and international exchange of observations that are critical for risk assessment, and development of preventive strategies. However,

the role of these scientific and technical agencies is not appropriately recognized at the political level in many countries and their resources and capacities vary significantly from country to country. How do you think these challenges can be addressed?

Disasters caused by natural hazards can impact countries in many ways, setting back socioeconomic development, threatening food security and health and causing large-scale loss of life. In fact, scientific studies indicate that global climate change could increase the frequency and severity of hydrometeorological hazards in particular. National Meteorological and Hydrological Services can provide critical information and advice for politicians, planners and risk managers as they seek to understand the characteristics of various hazards and fashion effective responses. To cite just one example, the work of these Services in mapping high-risk regions is critical. Better linkages between these agencies and the public can also help citizens better understand and appreciate risks, and enable them to make better decisions.

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